



Hartford Foundation for Public Giving Testimony in Support of
House Bill 7188, An Act Concerning Homelessness And The Chess Program
Senate Bill 1482, An Act Concerning An Elderly Nutrition Program
Senate Bill 1475, An Act Concerning Food Deserts And The Snap Program
Human Services Committee
March 11, 2025

Good afternoon Senator Lesser, Representative Gilchrest, Senator Harding, Representative Case and distinguished members of the Human Services Committee. The [Hartford Foundation for Public Giving](#) is grateful for this opportunity to submit written testimony in support of **House Bill 7188, An Act Concerning Homelessness And The Chess Program, Senate Bill 1482, An Act Concerning An Elderly Nutrition Program, and Senate Bill 1475, An Act Concerning Food Deserts And The Snap Program. We applaud the legislation's efforts to present comprehensive measures to mitigate and prevent homelessness for people living with mental health challenges, and efforts to address food insecurity for vulnerable populations.**

Since 1925, the Hartford Foundation has proudly served as the community foundation for the 29-town Greater Hartford region. This year, the foundation celebrates 100 years of service and remains committed to building an even greater Hartford region. Over the past two years, we have distributed more than \$100 million in grants to promote equitable opportunity for all residents in our region. Made possible by the gifts of generous individuals, families and organizations, the foundation has awarded grants of more than \$1 billion since its founding.

As part of our efforts to dismantle structural racism and advance equity in social and economic mobility in Greater Hartford's Black and Latine communities, the Hartford Foundation supports [basic human needs](#) in our region, applying an equity lens to the systems and programs that address access to food, stable housing, physical and emotional well-being.

Many of the foundation's past and current grants focus on preventing and reducing homelessness in Greater Hartford. Each year, the Foundation awards approximately \$1 million to local nonprofit organizations that provide access to emergency shelter, warming centers, housing subsidies, case management, eviction prevention and other services to residents at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Without adequate state funding, our investments only begin to meet the extensive need for emergency shelter and other housing services in Greater Hartford.

In 2021, the foundation began more fully supporting the mission of homelessness service providers by offering multiyear core support grants can be used flexibly to broadly support work aligned with an organization's mission and the foundation's strategic goals. The core support and targeted program investments in homelessness prevention and housing security have been critical in responding to the growing need to address housing insecurity in Greater Hartford. The foundation's investments also



include smaller annual emergency assistance grants made to proximate organizations providing urgent food, clothing, financial assistance (i.e., rent and utility expenses) and domestic violence aftercare.

The challenge of rising homelessness in Connecticut requires a coordinated, systemic response that addresses the multiple challenges people are often also managing as they look to secure stable housing. The foundation recognizes the need to ensure that people who are homeless need to be able to readily access mental health, addiction services, and other social services.

For many years, the Hartford Foundation has provided support to our region's community-based mental and physical health care providers, including those that provide treatment for substance abuse. **If we are to prevent and reduce homelessness, the state must lead the effort to provide adequate resources to support people with mental health challenges who might be in danger of becoming homeless and without stable housing.**

Feedback from our grantees and the most recent data available reflect a need to double-down on homelessness prevention and diversion. Homelessness is an issue that impacts people in a variety of circumstances, and while rising rents and other factors play a significant role, mental health and substance abuse issues can also be a factor. In order for the state to be more responsive, it needs to ensure that there is continuous cross-agency collaboration and communication to develop and implement comprehensive systems of support.

Connecticut policymakers have done a great deal over the past few years to address unmet mental health needs for residents following the pandemic and well before as we have seen the rise in unmet mental health as well as addiction service needs exacerbated by the opioid crisis, which the CT Department of Public Health has [documented](#).

House Bill 7188 would further promote coordinated access to services through the Connecticut Housing Engagement and Support Services (CHESS) program. The foundation applauds the legislation's systemic approach to planning, coordinating, and maximizing resources for people experiencing homelessness with complex mental health and addiction service needs. By working together, state agencies integral to this work can streamline administrative procedures to more effectively and efficiently deliver services to program participants.

The CHESS program would support Medicaid-based home and community-based services and help individuals with complex health conditions who have experienced homelessness and determined likely to benefit from targeted services to improve health and housing stability. The legislation would require the Commissioner of Housing, in consultation with the Department of Social Services (DSS), to prioritize CHESS participants for state-administered housing assistance, including Section 8 Housing Choice vouchers. The report to be submitted to the General Assembly by DOH, capturing the number of CHESS participants receiving state-administered housing assistance, will be critical in assessing the impact of the program, ways the approach may need to be modified, and additional supports that may be needed. The proposal also calls for the creation of a legislative oversight committee composed of chairpersons from the Housing, Human Services, Planning and Development, and Public Health Committees. The committee would review services for homeless persons, with a specific focus on the CHESS program, with the Commissioners of Housing and Social Services filing quarterly reports and seek the committee's



approval for any changes to homeless services. This proposal represents a thoughtful approach to improving housing stability and health outcomes for individuals with complex health conditions who experience homelessness. We recommend that the legislative oversight committee integrate approaches to hearing directly from participants in CHESS, for example by requesting that the DOH report include results of a survey of a cross section of participants in the state and/or by inviting the perspectives of participants through a virtual hearing. Through the foundation's grantmaking supporting expanding or new programs designed to address systemic challenges, we have seen how important it is to hear from people who are participants in the programs and systems to ground assessments with their direct experience.

The mental health needs in our region are significant as reported in [DataHaven's Greater Hartford Community Wellbeing 2023 Index](#): 12 percent of Connecticut adults reported that they felt down, depressed, or hopeless for more than half of the days during the past 2 weeks, but there were notable differences within the population, with 19 percent of young adults aged 18 to 34 reporting this (2.4 times more likely than all other age groups). Black and Latino adults were 1.6 and 2.3 times more likely, respectively, to report feeling down or depressed when compared to white adults, and adults earning less than \$15,000 per year were 7.4 times more likely to report this when compared to adults earning \$200,000 or more.

The Wellbeing Index also highlights the fact that substance abuse is a significant challenge as we have seen fatal overdoses rise in recent years, with 2021 being the most fatal year for overdoses in history. In Greater Hartford, the fatal overdose rate for Black residents spiked, then receded, and the rate for Latino residents eclipsed the rates of white and Black residents.

The Hartford Foundation and other philanthropic organizations have supported increasing food security across the Greater Hartford region for many years. **To advance efforts to ensure children and families throughout Connecticut have the nutrition they need to thrive, the state must lead efforts to invest in preventing and eliminating food insecurity.** Public commitment must also address the interconnection across basic human needs programs and systems to increase access to healthy food physical and mental health, and housing services to provide adequate support to the nonprofit organizations and state agencies delivering these services.

To advance these goals, the foundation supports Senate Bill 1482, An Act Concerning An Elderly Nutrition Program, which seeks to maximize federal supplemental nutrition assistance program funds for nutritious meals for elderly persons living at home or in congregate housing. We know that elderly residents can struggle with getting access to the nutrition they need, which gave rise to programs like Meals on Wheels.

As reported in [DataHaven's 2023 Greater Hartford Community Wellbeing Index](#), with rising inflation, many Connecticut families have struggled with food insecurity. **In 2022, the food insecurity rate in Connecticut was 17 percent**, with Latino households experiencing the highest rates of food insecurity at 34 percent and Black households at 25 percent, compared to 11 percent of White households.

According to the [2024 Food Security Annual Report issued by the Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity, and Opportunity](#), depending on the data source, food insecurity affects between 10.4



percent and 17 percent of Connecticut's population and has been rising in recent years. Food prices have increased 25 percent from 2019 to 2023 and are projected to continue increasing by smaller amounts in the coming years. The report notes that there are some food insecure individuals who are eligible to receive support from federal nutrition programs such as SNAP but have not enrolled. Much like food insecurity, utilization of federal nutrition programs vary among different groups. For example, in the last year with data broken down by demographics (2018), SNAP utilization was at 92 percent for all Connecticut residents but just 64 percent for Connecticut seniors. Which means more than a third of seniors eligible for federal nutrition programs are not getting support from some or all of the programs designed to ensure food security.

House Bill 1482 seeks to maximize the use of federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) funds to provide nutritious meals for elderly individuals . The bill directs the DSS Commissioner to work in consultation with the Commissioner of Aging and Disability Services and area agencies on aging to implement this effort. If successful, this work will substantially improve nutritional support for elderly residents by leveraging existing federal nutrition assistance resources. By requiring DSS to issue a report to the Human Services Committee, this legislation will also encourage transparency and assessment of the program's implementation and challenges.

For many years, the foundation has supported basic human needs (totaling approximately \$7 million each year) to support both regional and local nonprofit agencies across Greater Hartford in providing direct services and addressing systemic challenges. Our grants tackle a range of related issues, including food security and healthy food choice and other supports for wellness. This past year, the foundation's investments included more than \$688,000 in Emergency Assistance Grants to 71 nonprofit organizations throughout the region. More than half of these grants were focused on for food or food assistance. These grants prioritized nonprofits that serve neighborhoods and towns in the region with a higher percentage of residents living in poverty and seek to reduce barriers to equitable access to basic needs. Our investments have helped to address a portion of the enormous need, but philanthropy cannot adequately address food insecurity without state investment.

In November 2022, the foundation awarded a three-year, \$550,000 grant to [Connecticut Foodshare](#) to support Greater Hartford food distribution and its Value-Added Product food rescue program. According to the demographic data and census tract information of Connecticut Foodbank's target population, an estimated 39 percent of its constituents are people of color.

In December 2022, the foundation awarded \$200,000 over three years to [Hartford Food System \(HFS\)](#). The agency's work takes place throughout the Greater Hartford region, with a particular focus on Hartford. HFS works collaboratively with other nonprofit organizations to provide a systems-based approach that focuses on the root causes of food insecurity and challenges across food systems. HFS has also been successful in engaging Hartford residents to promote food justice and an equitable food economy.

In many of Connecticut's urban communities, lower income residents, who often do not have access to a car and are reliant on public transportation, face significant challenges accessing grocery stores, creating food deserts. Many city residents are located at least half a mile from the closest fresh food sources. For several years, the Hartford Foundation worked with the City of Hartford, the Hartford Community Loan



Fund, Trinity Health, the University of Connecticut, and other resident-led organizations to develop the Healthy Hartford Hub ('HHH') Project, a collaborative effort to address Hartford's food desert and positively impact the health of Hartford residents, especially those living in the city's North End / Promise Zone neighborhoods.

The plan was to recruit a national or regional grocery store chain and partner on the construction of a supermarket, a teaching kitchen, and a café that would offer shopping options for fresh foods and education on how to prepare them. The plan also included a pharmacy, medical clinic, exercise space and, possibly, housing. Despite significant efforts, for a variety of reasons, the effort to develop a full-service grocery store in this community has not come to fruition.

The CWCSEO 2024 Food Insecurity Report found that there are 65 Low-Income, Low-Access census tracts ("food deserts") in Connecticut with an average distance of at least one mile to a grocery store, and 207 with an average distance of at least 0.5 miles. The foundation **supports the intent of Senate Bill 1475, An Act Concerning Food Deserts And The Snap Program which directs the Commissioner of Social Services to develop a Restaurant Meals Program (RMP) for eligible Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) beneficiaries, specifically targeting seniors, disabled individuals, homeless people, and their spouses.** This proposal represents a creative approach to improving food access and affordability for vulnerable populations by expanding nutritious meal options for vulnerable SNAP recipients.

The approach also has the potential of expanding the number of patrons of local restaurants.

Under this program, beneficiaries would be able to purchase meals at participating restaurants using their SNAP benefits. The proposal also addresses potential pricing inequities in grocery stores. The legislation mandates that the Attorney General conduct and report on investigations into price discrimination by grocery stores, with a specific focus on areas identified as "food deserts" by the USDA's Food Access Research Atlas. According to the 2024 CWCSEO report, there are 65 food deserts in Connecticut with an average distance of at least one mile to a grocery store, and 207 tracts with an average distance of at least 0.5 miles.

The Hartford Foundation is ready to partner with legislators, the administration, advocates, philanthropy, and other stakeholders to eliminate food insecurity. We invite policymakers and other stakeholders to meet with us to explore public-private partnerships and ways philanthropic dollars could complement existing resources to help address funding gaps and foster equitable strategies to support Connecticut residents with significant unmet needs.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact our staff at policy@hfpg.org or 860-548-1888.